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From the Chief Executive Member



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Mr Liam Cosgrave  
Department of the Taoiseach  
Merrion Street  
DUBLIN 2

31 March 1974

*Dear Sir,*

Thank you for your letter of 21 March. May I say first of all that I was most grateful to you for your courtesy in sending me an advance copy of your statement to the Dail on the status of Northern Ireland, and I am glad you feel that my response was as positive as it was intended to be. We must hope that this particular issue will now decline in prominence. I fully recognise that in the context of your own political realities, such a statement of de facto recognition is a major and a courageous step. It is, however, open to doubt whether our Protestant community at large will ever be satisfied with anything less than an amendment to your constitution, and this attitude is of course reinforced every time a member on the Fianna Fail side goes out of his way to say that the constitutional claim remains in full force and effect. In the longer term, therefore, I hope very much that it will be possible for you to move in this direction.

Your letter throws into relief the need to take stock of the present situation. Frankly I would much have preferred to meet you for a full discussion on a personal basis; but I am afraid the political environment here is not opportune for such a meeting at the moment.

When we met at Hillsborough on 1 February, we envisaged an orderly pattern of progress, involving joint studies by officials, recommendations to your Government and to the Executive, and a further meeting or meetings between Ministers on the Hillsborough pattern to work out the detailed basis of a formal agreement ratifying the Sunningdale undertakings, for subsequent signing at a Tri-Partite Conference.

Since the joint official studies have now been completed, the next step is a further inter-Ministerial meeting. It would not, as you know, be possible for us to come to such a meeting before the final report of the Commission on Law Enforcement is available, and indeed it would be very right and proper that this report should be one of the subjects for discussion. We will certainly need to know, before any question of formal ratification arises, what decisions of policy are going to be taken on foot of the Commission's Report. In these circumstances it would, in my view, be quite premature to fix a specific early date, such as 10 April, for formal ratification. I recognise the force of what you say about the benefits of early ratification in removing some of the doubts and fears which arise out of the present uncertainty. On the other hand, we could not contemplate ratification until all aspects of the agreement have been satisfactorily worked out, which is bound to take some further time.



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In particular, I must put before you very frankly the existing realities here as far as a Council of Ireland is concerned. I personally remain convinced that a structure on the general lines contemplated at Sunningdale could make a most worthwhile and practical contribution to relations between North and South. I fully recognise, too, the importance of such a concept as a means of "Identification" for the Catholic community here. I have personally done my very best to advocate its benefits.

The fact of the matter, however, is that the concept in the precise terms envisaged at Sunningdale does not at present enjoy sufficient support in Northern Ireland. In saying this, I do not take into consideration only the recent election results, significant and depressing though they were. I must also consider the general tone of public opinion in my Party and in the country at large. Here the reality of the situation is that I could not at the present time carry my own Assembly Party in support of the full Council of Ireland idea. Members of the most moderate and reasonable character now take this view. The most sensible and well-balanced people in the professional and business community convey the same message to me.

In the plainest terms the situation is that, if we were to propose early ratification and immediate implementation of the Sunningdale proposals for a Council of Ireland there would certainly be so many defections from my Assembly Party that we would be defeated in the Assembly; if, indeed, the Executive had not already broken up before then. Moreover, I am convinced that the mood of the majority, against a background of renewed violence, is such that to press ahead with this concept without modification would be to risk the gravest consequences.

Now of course I know full well that this is also a very important issue for my SDLP colleagues - that indeed they have been taking the line that full ratification of Sunningdale is a sine qua non of their continuance in the Executive. But I must tell you that if we cannot now find the means to secure for the Council of Ireland concept a broader basis of acceptability, then the power-sharing experiment is doomed. That would be a tragic situation, the consequences of which cannot be calculated.

It is this aspect of the situation which most urgently requires further consideration, and what I would propose to do - if this is acceptable to you - is to send Ken Bloomfield, my Permanent Secretary, who is fully in my confidence in the matter, to Dublin towards the end of next week. He would bring a further letter from me, and make himself available thereafter for any discussion you think desirable.



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Finally, may I thank you for sending me a copy of your draft of a formal Agreement? There is only one point I would wish to make upon it at this stage. You refer to an "agreed minute" to be signed by the Irish and British Governments and "the Parties comprising the Northern Ireland Executive". Now that the Northern Ireland Executive is in being, it is that Executive as such which must be the Northern Ireland party to any agreement. It would be quite inappropriate, and wholly unacceptable to me personally, to sign on behalf of political parties.

*Kind regards,*

*For signed*

*Simon Doherty*

A B D FAULKNER